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Overview of the Politics of North Korea

North Korea is probably one of the more troubled and troubling nations on the face of the planet today. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to develop an overview of the politics of contemporary North Korea. The essay will begin with a history of North Korea itself. Then, it will proceed to an analysis of the current dictator of the nation. Then, it will proceed to a consideration of the situation of North Korea with respect to nuclear weapons. Finally, it will reflect on the relationship of North Korea with other nations on the globe today, including the United States.

History of North Korea

To start with, then, the history of North Korea as an independent nation can be traced back to the Cold War. As Pruitt has written: "Japan annexed the Korean peninsula in 1910, and the country spent the next 35 years under Japanese military rule. With Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, American troops landed in the southern part of the peninsula, while Soviet troops secured the area north of the latitude 30 degrees N (or the 38th parallel). In this way, communism took firm hold in the north" (paragraph 2). Back during World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were of course allies in the cause of the struggle against Nazi Germany and allied Japan and Italy. With the close World War II, though, the United States and the Soviet Union became rivals, emerging as the two major superpowers in the new post-war world. This led to the emergence of the Cold War, which involved more or less the entire world

being carved up into two spheres of influence: the democratic bloc under the United States, and the Communist bloc under the Soviet Union.

The emergence of North Korea as a nation was entirely due to this split of spheres of influence. Before the Cold War, the entire Korean peninsula was in fact one nation; but as the Soviet Union gained control of the north and the United States gained control of the south, the North Korea and South Korea emerged as distinct political entities and took radically different courses of development over the next several decades. The result has been that South Korea has emerged as a thriving democratic society, whereas North Korea has become a tyrannical dictatorship. There have periodically been talks about reunifying the peninsula. However, as Phillips has pointed out, this would be deeply problematic, seeing as it would involve the fusion of "one of the world's most dynamic and developed economies with one of its most disheveled and repressive" (paragraph 6). Despite the very close proximity of the two nations, their societies and economies exist in almost different worlds, which would make any project of reunification very difficult, to put the matter as mildly as possible

The Erratic Dictator

There have been real concerns raised about whether the current dictator of North Korea, who is a descendant of the original dictator, might be clinically insane. This is because of his recurrent tendency to act like a megalomaniac. One psychologist, however, has suggested that he is not actually insane, but rather simply playing the role that has been given to him by his society: "Kim Jong-Un almost certainly feels god-like because of the drug-like effects . . . that power has on his brain. Power is an aphrodisiac which casts a spell of charisma around the holder and bewitches those he has power over, and if that be millions of people, so be it" (paragraph 8). In other words, the suggestion could be made that it is not so much the dictator

who is insane as it is the social and cultural system that allows a dictator to emerge in the first place—a system that places absolute, god-like power into the hands of a single mortal human being. Kim Jong-Un may simply be acting in the way that most "sane" people would act when placed in such a position.

From the safety of the West, it would be easy to consider some of Kim Jong-Un's antics almost comical. However, the warning must be kept in mind that the dictator must in fact be taken seriously, insofar as he holds absolute power within his nation and has a great deal of capacity to cause a great deal of harm to a great many people. As Topping has reported: "A young North Korean defector and human rights activist has urged the west to not consider dictator Kim Jong-un as a comic figure. 'Please don't see Kim Jong Un as a joke,' she told the Women in the World event in London. 'He is killing millions of people'" (paragraph 1). In other words, what may look comical from a distance is anything but that for the actual people who have to live with the dictator and the consequences of his actions. The fact is that Kim Jong-Un is one of the more serious threats to human rights in the world today.

For his part, President Obama (qtd. Blair) in has referred to Kim Jong-Un as an erratic and dangerous figure and reminded the dictator of the military capabilities at the disposal of the United States: "We could, obviously, destroy North Korea with our arsenals . . . But aside from the humanitarian costs of that, they are right next door to our vital ally, South Korea" (paragraph 5). That a man as generally measured and rational as Obama would seriously consider simply just wiping an entire nation off the map gives some indication as to the level of real threat that Kim Jong-Un poses to the world as a whole. Obama is clearly concerned that the dictator, insane or not, will do something very stupid, and leave the rest of the world cleaning up the mess. In order to understand the nature of this threat in a deeper way, though, it will now be necessary to

discuss North Korea's quite disturbing adventures in nuclear weaponry and its efforts to develop a nuclear arsenal.

The Specter of Nuclear Weapons

Under Kim Jong-Un, North Korea has been consistently boasting about its desire and efforts to obtain a nuclear arsenal. In this connection, North Korea's recent missile launches have proven to be especially troubling and earned strong condemnation from international stakeholders. As Nichols has reported on the 23rd of June: "The United Nations Security Council on Thursday condemned North Korea's most recent ballistic missile launches as a grave violation of an international ban and called on the 193 U.N. member states to enforce toughened sanctions on the Asian state" (paragraph 1). Such missile launches are disturbing because the successful development of ballistic missiles would enhance the capacity of North Korea to actually deliver nuclear weapons to selected targets. The development of such a technology by a nation such as North Korea is explicitly forbidden by international law.

Regarding nuclear weapons as such, it is somewhat unclear to what extent the threat is tangibly real, and to what extent it is more or less a power play undertaken by Kim Jong-Un. This goes back to the basic erraticism of his character, as well as the megalomania that is either intrinsic to him or has been cultivated by the structure of his society. Essentially, Kim Jong-Un has god-like power within his own nation, but virtually none at all outside of that nation; outside of North Korea, most people instinctively feel like laughing at him, both for his physical appearance and because he may in fact be truly demented. This cannot possibly sit well with the ego of a dictator such as himself. So, looking around, he may realize that having a nuclear weapon is one way to be taken very seriously by the world as a major power to be contended with—and therefore, he may develop the desire to build a nuclear arsenal. This thought process,

while absurd from the perspective of international relations, is still nevertheless psychologically sound when considering a dictator such as Kim Jong-Un.

Moreover, aside from the possibility that North Korea may use nuclear weapons in a very erratic and irresponsible way in the event that the nation obtained the relevant technologies, there is also the danger that North Korea may engage with other parties—including terrorist organizations—to smuggle those weapons into unauthorized hands. North Korea is not a free society that is governed by the rule of law, and there would be little reason for anyone to have in the regulatory frameworks for nuclear weapons within the nation. Rather, there is every reason to believe that Kim Jong-Un would be fully in favor of engaging in unsavory deals, in the event that he believed that this would enhance his own prestige and power. In short, North Korea could not be trusted to engage in the rational and humanitarian considerations that a responsible nation would when it comes to nuclear weapons; nor could Kim Jong-Un, intoxicated with power as he is, be trusted to even comprehend the level of international danger posed by nuclear weapon capabilities.

International Relations

At the international level, it would seem that many stakeholders have simply been making majors regarding when North Korea will simply collapse of its own accord due to its radical internal dysfunctions. However, not only have such predictions been proven wrong over the course of the past couple decades, an actual collapse would actually produce several very serious problems in its own way: "it would mean integrating 25 million very poor North Koreans into much richer South Korea, winding down decades of propaganda that told North Koreans to hate and fear the world, dismantling one of the largest political prison systems in the world, and liquidating an enormous, nuclear-armed military" (paragraph 12). In short, massive international

intervention would be needed in the event of a full national collapse in order to ensure that the consequences do not prove to be even more of a humanitarian catastrophe than the ongoing existence of North Korea itself.

It is difficult, however, to really foretell the future of North Korea on the international scene, especially given the fact that the nation would seem to be in the process of alienating even the few allies that it has left. Russia and China, for example, would be natural allies of North Korea, both because of their shared Communist heritage as well as their general antagonism toward the United States. However, Russia and especially China aspire to be taken seriously as major world powers and actually have the capacities to pursue this endeavor; and in this context, the antic of Kim Jong-Un would increasingly come to be seen as liabilities and embarrassments. At some point, for example, China may decide to simply cut North Korea loose, for the simple reason that China would no longer be willing to associate itself with the kind of international irresponsibility that Kim Jong-Un perpetrates on a regular basis. If this were to occur, then the predictions of the collapse of North Korea may well come true.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the politics of North Korea. The main conclusion that has emerged here is that North Korea is a failed state that is run by an erratic and megalomaniacal dictator, and that the future of the nation is highly uncertain. The best case scenario would probably consist of the reunification of the Korean peninsula. However, given the radical discrepancies between the societies, cultures, and economies of North Korea and South Korea, it is difficult to imagine how this could feasibly happen. The other alternative, though, would seem to be the eventual internal collapse of North Korea, which

would also produce a very difficult international situation. One way or the other, then, the way forward in this regard is not going to be an easy one.

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